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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 116 (2014) 77 – 81

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences5th World Conference on Educational Sciences WCES-2013

Collaborative Action Professional Development of School Principals

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Abstract

The professional development of school principals is not only crucial to the reform agenda but also a matter of national concern and part of the strategic plan of the Thailand Ministry of Education. Therefore policy educational institutions and related organizations are required to form strong collaborative teams within schools in order to widely develop schools and community networking. The aim of this study is to investigate collaborative action for the professional development of school principals. This collaborative action involves three parties composed of universities, the Office of Educational Service Area and its schools and communities. The timeframe of this study was two years and included four phases. The first phase consisted of a contextual study and model construction, followed by the model verification in the second phase. The third phase involved the development of programme assessment tools and preparation of supplementary learning documents. Finally, an evaluation of the implemented programme was carried out in the last phase. Results revealed that the majority of school principals are satisfied with the training and learning process. Hence they have improved their knowledge skills and competencies in management. Consequently, they developed quality projects for their schools by using action research, strategic planning and instructional leadership. In conclusion, an effective model of collaborative action is multi-dimensional involving needs assessment, goal setting, empowerment, self-study, intensive seminars, action research and programme evaluation.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Keywords: Professional development, school principal, collaborative action;

1. Introduction

Globalization has brought with it an intense interest in education quality overall. It is strongly believed that empowering schools would lead to better administration and higher student achievement (Keawdeang, 2003; Somprach, 2003; Ruenchareon, 2005). In respect of this, the professional development of school principals is vital because leadership has a direct impact on learners and plays a central role in developing the quality of students (Whitaker, 1993; Kinney, 2008; Yan & Ehrich, 2009). Therefore principals are expected to be leaders and managers

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who are visionary, provide guidelines, make strategic plans and decisions, resolve problems, develop teachers and generally oversee every aspect of the school's functioning (Butler, 2008; Moller, 2009).

2. Research objectives

The main aim of this study is to develop a framework for the professional development of school principals. The following are the objectives of the study:

- To study different methods for achieving the professional development of school principals at the Office of Educational Service Area.
- To develop the collaboration necessary for the professional development of school principals.
- To study the outcomes of the model for school principals' professional development.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted in four phases in order to build a model in which personal initiative and networking make substantial contributions to the renewal ongoing education and development of principals. The four phases included contextual study and model construction, verification of the model, development of performance and programme assessment tools, and implementation and evaluation of the programme.

3.1. Contextual study and model construction

The first phase generally covered the study of concepts, theories, contexts, and policies and practices in order to develop and outline the collaboration pattern of the professional development of school principals. Below are the details:

- To study concepts, theories and review of related literature in the professional development of school principals.
- To study the self-development of outstanding school principals.
- To interview three experts from the Ministry of Education, leading Thai universities and the Educational Administrator Development Institute, specifically on the topic of collaboration and the professional development of school principals.
- To analyse and synthesize concepts and related information for developing a process or a model of the professional development of school principals.

3.2. Verification of the model

The second phase dealt with connoisseurship - to interview experts on an appropriate model. Below is the procedure followed in the second phase.

- To identify the qualifications of experts and recruit 17 experts.
- To plan seminars, determine related issues, prepare documentation, set appropriate times and make appointments to meet the experts.
- To establish a suitable model of development according to the research plan.
- To improve the components and activities of the model of development according to the experts' suggestions.

3.3. Development of performance and programme assessment tools

This phase mainly prepared supplementary learning documentation that dealt with the performance instruments and programme assessment tools.

3.4. Implementation and evaluation of programme

The two groups of principals, 29 and 36 respectively, from the Office of Educational Service Area, Khon Kaen province, Thailand who were involved in this phase, mainly study how the professional development of school principals is put into action. This phase required coordination between the Faculty of Education, Khon Kaen University specifically, the Office of Educational Service Area and those schools under their supervision.

4. Results

4.1. Requirement and restrictions of professional development

The results of the researchers' investigation, which included a 'ten questions survey', indicated that effective professional development for school principals was based on professional knowledge and a professional mindset. In addition, principals valued the knowledge they obtained through networking with other principals and considered professional development as a means of career development. This professional mindset influenced their commitment to staff and students, a positive and person-centered attitude, and life-long learning.

The results revealed that factors hindering principals' professional development are a lack of understanding of contemporary views of administration and management, inadequate knowledge of research skills specifically on school-based research, heavy workloads that reduced opportunities to do academic work, scarcity of consultants or experts, uneven distribution of resources across the region, lack of exposure to good models and practices, and lack of self-confidence.

4.2. Professional knowledge

Findings indicated that in order to promote professional knowledge, professional development consisted of the following elements.

4.2.1. Self-study

A variety of text material was made available and found to be useful for reinforcing the existing knowledge of principals and as a means of introducing new concepts of leadership.

4.2.2. Intensive seminar

This intensive seminar was conducted over seven days by senior educational administrators, Faculty of Education staff and some school principals. A large amount of content focused on case studies.

4.2.3. Internship

Each principal was required to study a school that is identified as a best practice school and write a case study of the school.

4.2.4. Improvement project

Principals were required to design a project to be implemented in their own schools. The project could be either a practical development or formal research project.

4.2.5. Project implementation

Finally, principals implemented their proposal which took place over a period of four to six months.

4.3. Professional mindset

This is a complex problem because a mindset is a constructed variable and is open to multiple interpretations. By applying a process approach emphasis was placed on empowerment, networking, personal initiative and team work. As authority and status are closely connected in Thai culture many principals do not see themselves as an integral part of the system. Researchers did their best to develop a collaborative and empowering environment and in particular they were concerned with developing a mutual understanding between the principals because this would contribute to empowerment. However, it proved to be difficult for some of the principals to move away from authority and status to a more democratic style of interaction.

Researchers believed that it is cost effective to immerse principals in a supportive environment and allow them to support and learn from each other. The purpose of professional development at this point in Thailand's transition is to empower principals to lead their schools through empowering teachers by complementing traditional thinking with the development of a knowledge economy.

4.4. Model of professional development

Based on the findings above, Figure 1 summarizes the framework for principals' professional development.

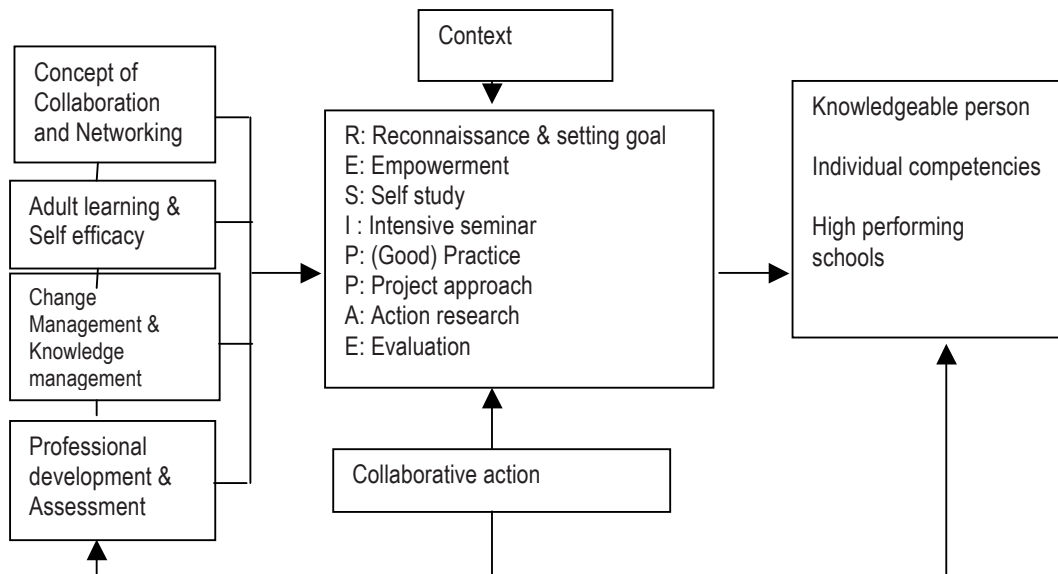


Figure 1. Framework of professional development

5. Discussion

The current content of professional development is determined by external authorities and consists of an expert lecturing style which serves to reinforce Thai social and professional culture. If principals really are to be change agents, they need to be committed to the school as the learners' community (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008). However, this is unlikely to happen with a simple top-down process.

This study found that the feeling of being in a supportive environment is fundamental to the participation and commitment of the principals. In a supportive environment, principals will actively participate in their own professional development. The results were not all that the researchers had hoped, but they were encouraged through the collaboration that they experienced.

The final model that was developed as part of this study consists of eight steps summarized using a mnemonic device: RESIPPAE, where R represents reconnaissance and goal setting, E empowering, S self-study, I intensive seminar, P (best) practice or internship, P project, A action research or research and development, and E evaluation. These steps are consistent with the work of Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989), Daresh and Playko (1992), Bates (1994), Robinson (1994), Charoenwongsak (2000), and Somprach (2003).

Acknowledgements

This project was made possible with funding from the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT), Thailand.

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